

A Short-Term Partnership with Long-Term Implications

Protecting a Forgotten Oasis on the Oregon Trail

Alcome Spring is an undeveloped 223-acre tract of land located in rural Marshall County, Kansas. In 1993, a group of residents near Alcome Spring came together to form the Alcome Spring Preservation Association because they feared that this special place would be lost. The Association successfully raised the funds needed to acquire the property. They found, however, that the management of a historic site presented challenges very different from the challenges of acquiring the site. Through the National Park Service-Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program (RTCA), the Association received much needed technical assistance in the areas of management planning, resource protection, and interpretation.

Alcome Spring is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its association with the Oregon Trail. This site is particularly well known for its association with the members of the Donner and Reed families who later met with tragedy. While this association may be the reason the site is well known today, a key part of this project was to explore and interpret the other reasons that this site is significant. In particular, this site is significant as an intact property associated with the mass migration westward. This property also helps remind visitors of the importance such camps played in terms of providing water, timber, fuel, game, forage and rest.

Frequent spring flooding of the Big Blue River made this site the first major camp and rest stop for the pioneers after leaving Independence, Missouri. For a few weeks each spring this site became a temporary city full of immigrants passing time while waiting for the river to go down. Here the pioneers had a chance to rest, reorganize, and reflect the

journey ahead of them with the insight of a few days of actual life on the trail.

This site has never been developed and lies in rural Kansas farm country. The tranquility of the contemporary setting fails to convey the level of activity and congestion that must have occurred when hundreds of people and animals became blocked by the flooded river. However, this wild and rugged setting does provide an excellent opportunity to reflect on what the site must have been like in the past and consider the motivations of the emigrants who chose to take up life on a difficult trail leading to an uncertain future.

The spring and natural alcove for which the site is named was a popular oasis for travelers along the Oregon and California trails from the 1840s to the 1870s. Near the spring are stones which contain numerous carvings showing the names and dates of those who rested or were buried near this site on their way west. Sarah Keyes, the mother-in-law of James F. Reed died here in May of 1846. A memorial marker was erected in the early 1950s in memory of her. Swales created by wagons cutting across the prairie are still visible. Much of the site's vegetation is tallgrass prairie which has a great diversity

Alcome Spring in 1996. Photo by the author.



Graphic from one of the site's interpretive brochures.

of plant species due to the fact that it was never disturbed by plowing. While the site has a high degree of historic integrity, the annual visitation of about 10,000 people began to have an immediate and adverse impact.

The Association was committed to preserving the site, but they were equally committed to providing access to the public. The tandem goals of resource preservation and public access seemed to be in opposition to one another. Recognizing this, the Association realized that they needed help from others who have struggled with this challenge elsewhere. The Association first received advice and assistance from the State of Kansas and the National Park Service Long Distance Trails Office in Utah. As a part of these early efforts, staff from the RTCA program in Omaha were invited to help make recommendations as part of a one-day workshop. This soon evolved into a two-year commitment from the Omaha RTCA office.

While a fair amount of general information about the history of the site was available, there was little specific information about the historic resources at the site. Those resources that were identified, such as stone carvings and large tracts of tallgrass prairie, were deteriorating at a rate accelerated by visitation. These problems were rooted to a degree in the lack of management goals and policies for the site, combined with a lack of development designed to protect resources and accommodate visitor needs. This fact became obvious when a group of "black powder" enthusiasts requested permission to build large permanent practice targets in the middle of this historic property. Lacking clear policies for the management of the site, the Association was uncertain how to respond to this and other requests for the use and development of the site.

Building on assistance provided by the State of Kansas and the NPS Long Distance Trails Office, RTCA staff began a systematic process of identifying problems and developing solutions. The process began with visits to the site, review of available literature, and interviews with people knowledgeable about the site. This information then was used to help design brief public workshops focused on clearly articulating the problems and issues related to the care and management of the site. These workshops, organized and facilitated by RTCA staff, were open to everyone who had an interest in the site. A key role played by the RTCA staff was to bring in subject matter experts to provide advice in areas such as natural resources, interpretation, collections management, archeology, cultural landscape architecture, and trail and parking design. A key aspect of this process was to set priorities to guide actions related to the protec-



tion of the different resources and providing public access. Through these workshops, participants were able to clearly define goals and desires for the future of the site, as well as interpretive themes.

The next step was to develop an action plan in cooperation with the Association and other interested parties. This plan provided a vision for the physical development of the site, interpretation, and long term resource management. The resulting plan provided guidance on trail layout and design that provided access into the park without damaging critical resources. Recommendations for such utilitarian, but important, issues as parking and the placement of interpretive signs also were included in the plan. General recommendations concerning land use and recreational activities also were included to help the property's managers address future requests for special uses or development.

The partnership that developed has succeeded in helping to protect an important historic site while leaving the long-term care and management of the property in the hands of local guardians who know it best. The actions by the Association and those who worked with them have made it possible for future visitors to fully appreciate the historical importance of this rest stop on the Oregon and California Trail. During the summer of 1998 the implementation of this plan began with the improvement of parking facilities, trails, and the development of interpretive signs and brochures.

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